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ABSTRACT

One of the strongest sources of anti-gay discriminatory rhetoric comes from various religious traditions. In spite of such animosity, gay, lesbian, and bisexual (GLB) people continue to claim their place at the table and a number of religious leaders with same-sex sexual orientation continue to work within their religious denominations. The present study utilized quantitative and qualitative methods to gather information on this unique sample of GLB population: GLB clergy. In particular, the study examines the levels of self esteem, social support, stress over sexual orientation, religious orientation, and spiritual well-being in a sample of 32 religious leaders who identify themselves as gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Furthermore, this study examines the effects of religious backgrounds (i.e., conservative) and practices (i.e., conversion therapy) on GLB clergy's emotional, spiritual, and relational health. (Contains 48 references.) (JDM)

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Spiritual, Emotional, and Social Well Being of Gay Clergy

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Presentation at APA 2001, San Francisco

One of the strongest sources of anti-gay discriminatory rhetoric comes from various religious traditions. In spite of such animosity, lesbian, gay, and bisexual (GLB) people continue to claim their "place at a table" and a number of religious leaders with same-sex sexual orientation continue to work within their religious denominations. The present study utilized quantitative and qualitative methods to gather information on this unique sample of GLB population: GLB clergy. In particular, the study examines the levels of self-esteem, social support, stress over sexual orientation, religious orientation, and spiritual well being in a sample of 32 religious leaders who identify themselves as gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Furthermore, this study examines the effects of religious backgrounds (i.e., conservative) and practices (i.e., conversion therapy) on GLB clergy's emotional, spiritual, and relational health.

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Emotional, Social, and Spiritual Well-Being of GLB Clergy

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Spirituality is increasingly viewed as an integral part of psychology's focus on multiculturalism (Sue, Bingham, Porche-Burke, & Vasquez, 1999). Religious experience is becoming a part of mainstream psychology both as a multicultural element as well as a viable clinical and research phenomenon (Hill & Butter, 1995; Sethi & Seligman, 1993; Worthington, Kurusu, McCullough, & Sandage, 1996).

A number of studies have indicated that certain forms of religious involvement are associated with better psychological, physical, and social functioning (Bergin, 1991; Bergin, Masters, & Richards; 1987; Worthington et al., 1996). Organized religion, on the other hand, has been looked upon by many as a source of oppression and perpetuation of prejudice. In particular, the treatment of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals by many organized religious groups has largely been one of repudiation or reproach (Bawer, 1993; Hasbany, 1989). Reparative or conversion therapies attempting to "change" sexual orientation of non-heterosexual individuals have also been associated with religious institutions who are intolerant of homosexuality (Drescher, 1998; Haldeman, 1994). In light of such judgments, LGB individuals have had to grapple with the role of religion and spirituality in their lives, struggling with difficult choices of rejecting an integral part their selves, or their faith (Hancock, 2000; Ritter & O'Neill, 1989; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000; Wagner, Serafini, Rabkin, Remien, & Willliams, 1994).

Even more precarious seems to be the position of GLB individuals who are involved in full or part-time religious work. While the Gallop reports indicate that the percentage of those who support for employment of GLB persons as clergy has increased from 36% in 1977 to 54% in 1999 (Yang, 2000), most of religious denominations continue to deny ordination to those who are openly gay, lesbian, or bisexual (Anderson, 1997). However, in the past and recent history GLB individuals have continued to work as religious ministers. Historian John Boswell's (1980) suggests that throughout history church offered gay clergy an opportunity to use their unique gifts. More recently in a non-scholarly book Cozzens (2000) estimates that between 23 and 58 percent of the Roman Catholic priests and seminarians are homosexual. In their article on the sexual struggles of 23 clergymen, Fones, Levine, Althof, and Risen (1999) found that "the proportion of clergy who declared a homosexual orientation was far higher than general population (38%)" (p.191). A lesbian minister whom the author interviewed, stated that when she "finally decided to talk to an Episcopal woman-priest about going to a seminary, the priest said "Don't worry about that. Half the priests are gay but not out." The accurate number of religious leaders within various faith traditions with same-sex orientation is nearly impossible to estimate since the general public opinion (Yang, 1999) and the religious authoritative statements (Anderson, 1997; Melton, 1991) often view LGB individuals as unfit for the role of the minister. Popular news sources highlight that many LGB clergy risk losing their positions (Anonymous, 1998; Niebuhr, 1998; Stream, 1999; Martin, 2000). "Don't ask, don't tell" approach that is implemented in the US military, often implies with the religious leaders with same-sex sexual orientation (based on interviews).

Hancock (2000) suggests that religion in the lives of LGB persons has had damaging psychological effects, effecting self-esteem, interpersonal relations, and the quality of spiritual life. Religion, however, may be a herald of

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liberation for groups of people, such as the LGB community, who are marginalized by the majority society (Edwards, 1984). Nugent and Gramick (1989) describe four possible approaches to homosexuality that a religious community may hold: Rejecting-Punitive, Rejecting-Nonpunitive, Qualified Acceptance, and Full Acceptance. The rise of the "LGB affirming" movement within various faith communities may provide one example of how faith communities are embracing the "full acceptance" position on homosexuality. Wagner et al. (1994) showed that participation of Catholic gay men in Dignity, an organization for Catholic gay men and lesbians, may have a "boosting" effect on acceptance of their sexuality (p.106).

Religious identification of the LGB individuals has been identified as one of the significant areas of exploration into diversity of this group (Patterson, 1995). The present study focuses on exploring the aspects of emotional, social, and spiritual dimensions of GLB Christian religious ministers.

The main hypotheses of the study focus on the effects of religious orientation, spiritual/existential well-being, stress over sexual orientation, and social support on LGB Christian clergy's self-esteem. I hypothesized that the levels of self-esteem would be related to the stress over sexual orientation and the type of perceived social support that a lesbian, gay, or bisexual individual receives. Another of the study's foci is the religious and spiritual dimension of the LGB clergy lives. The present study was interested in the role of spiritual well-being and religious orientation in the lives of LGB individuals who have chosen to continue being active with their religious practices. I hypothesized that spiritual well being (both religious and existential) would contribute positively to the participants' levels of self-esteem. Furthermore, intrinsic religious orientation would be associated with greater religious commitment but not with the persons' greater self-esteem, while extrinsic personal and extrinsic social orientation may be positively related to self-esteem and perceived levels of social support. In addition, I hypothesized that individuals who were raised in or have attended churches that were considered conservative and had conservative religious practices (i.e., used conversion/reparative practices or viewed homosexuality as unacceptable or evil) will be negatively impacted in their personal and social functioning.

Method

Participants

Participants for this study were recruited at a conference focused on the LGBT "Welcoming Movement" in Christian denominations entitled Witnessing Our Welcome 2000 (WOW 2000). Two hundred and fifty surveys were distributed during the conference breaks and 101 surveys were collected during the conference while 26 more arrived by mail. Among the 85 respondents who identified themselves as non-heterosexual, 39% indicated that they were involved in full or part time religious work. For the purpose of the study and due to the under-representation of the heterosexual respondents, only non-heterosexual participant data was analyzed. Three of the surveys did not meet validity criteria (i.e., more than one of the three validity questions was not answered correctly). In the remaining sample of 32 participants, 94% (30) self-identified as gay or lesbian and 6% (2) as bisexual. Participants were almost equally male and female (53% female and 47% male). Their age ranged from 25 to over 65, with median age of 45 to 56. Only three (9.4%) of the participants were non-Caucasian. The sample characteristics matched closely the attendance of the conference (WOW2000, 2000). The quantitative data was supplemented by quasi-qualitative interviews with a gay and a lesbian clergy.

Instruments

Intrinsic-Extrinsic Religious Orientation Scale – Revised (I/E-ROS). (Gorsuch & McPherson, 1989). The I/E-ROS is a measure of religious orientation which consists of 14 items measuring three subscales: Intrinsic Religious Orientation (I) and two Extrinsic Religious Orientations, Extrinsic Social (ES) and Extrinsic Personal (EP). Intrinsic religious orientation attempts to measure individuals' commitment to religion as an end in. Extrinsic religious orientation measures attitudes toward religion as a means to some end, whether personal or social. Items assess various religious behaviors, values and attitudes on a five-point Likert scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The internal consistency estimates for the I/E-ROS subscales are reported as .83 for I and .65 for E (Gorsuch & McPherson, 1989). Test-retest reliability for the simplified version of the total scale was reported to be .93 (Hood, 1970).

Spiritual Well-Being Scale (SWBS). (Paloutzian & Ellison, 1982). The SWBS an overall measure of the perceived spiritual quality of life measured on two dimensions: Religious Well-Being and Existential Well-Being. The instrument contains 20 items, which are answered on a six point Likert-type scale. Ellison (1983) reports internal consistency of .82 to .94 for the Religious Well-Being subscale, .78 to .86 for the Existential Well-Being subscale, and .89 to .94 for the total scale. Test-retest reliability for the overall SWBS score is .93, while for the Religious Well-Being subscale it is .96 and for the Existential Well-Being - .86 (Ellison, 1983).

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. (Rosenberg, 1965). This 10-item questionnaire is scored on a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (4). Silber and Tippett (1965) reported a test-retest correlation of .85 for the scale and .56 to .83 correlations with several similar measures and clinical assessment. In a sample of gay men and lesbian women, the internal consistency reliability coefficient for the scale was reported to be .80 (Walters & Simoni, 1993).

Social Provisions Scale (SPS). (Cutrona & Russell, 1987; 1990). SPS is composed of 24 items to which subjects respond on a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (4). The SPS measures perceived social support in six functional areas (subscales): Attachment, Social Integration, Reassurance of Worth, Reliable Alliance, Guidance, and Opportunities for Nurturance. Research suggests that "buffering affects" of social support are most likely to occur when a particular style of social support (as indicated by subscales) is matched to a particular stressor (Cohen & Willis, 1985; Cutrona & Russell, 1990). Thus, the current study will use the subscales in examining the effects of social support on participants' self-esteem and other variables of interest. Internal consistency (coefficient alpha) reported for each subscale ranged from .76 to .84 in a sample of older adults, and from .61 to .76 in a sample of teachers (Cutrona & Rusell, 1986). The authors report test-retest reliabilities ranging from .37 to .66 for the subscales, with total test-retest reliability $r = .59$.

Persons' reported on their sexual identity development by responding on a four-point Likert-type scale to the statement: "I feel stress or conflict with myself because of my sexual orientation" (Otis & Skinner, 1996).

Results

To examine the study's main hypotheses, multiple regression analyses were conducted with the measure of self-esteem as a dependent variable and measures of stress over one's sexual orientation, social support (total),

intrinsic religious orientation (total and individual subscales), and spiritual well being (total and subscales) as independent factors. Several models of regression were tested. Both step-wise and backward multiple regression analyses resulted in a model that explained 45% of variance in participants' self-esteem by two predictor variables – measures of stress over sexual orientation and social provision scale.

Thus, several of the study's hypotheses were supported by the regression analysis. Self-esteem was predicted by the person's stress over sexual orientation and perceived social support. None of the measures of religious orientation or spiritual well-being significantly associated with the participants' levels of self-esteem.

Among the other demographic questions of interest in this study were questions about individuals' education, personal counseling, geographic location, and church background. In the study's sample, 87.5% of the participants had graduate ministry degrees and 12.5% obtained a bachelors degree. 93.8% of the participants indicated that they have received personal counseling. Reflecting the location of the WOW 2000 conference, the largest percentage of the participants indicated that they lived in the Central/Midwest region of the United States (53.3%).

The religious backgrounds of those who participated in the study revealed the following. 81.3% of the participants indicated that they attended church before the age 18 "weekly or more often." 84.4% indicated that they attended church weekly or more often throughout their adult life and 81.3% - in the past year. This last figure may reflect the fact that full-time religious work and ordination as a minister may not indicate that the person is currently working within a church. For example, a person may consider herself to be a clergy even if she was asked to leave her post as a minister because of her sexual orientation. Participants described that in their church experiences, 84.4% indicated that during the past year they attended faith communities that used gender-inclusive language and 72% - churches with diverse membership. 40.6% indicated that they have attended churches that used literal Bible interpretation and 15.6% have attended churches that supported conversion/reparative practices. Furthermore, 59.4% of the participants indicated that at some point in their life, they attended a church with a rejecting-punitive view of homosexuality. Conversely, 21.9% indicated that they have never attended a church with a full acceptance view of homosexuality. However, 72% indicated that they have attended church with a full acceptance view during the last year. Overall, 70.7% of the participants described their religious background as "conservative" at some point during their life (with 46.9% attending a conservative church only before the age 18).

These results indicate that while a large percentage of the participants in this sample reported having been exposed to conservative and rejecting-punitive religious beliefs, almost three-forth of the sample are working within faith communities that fully accept homosexuality as a sexual and relational expression that is healthy and equal to the heterosexual expression.

Further univariate analyses of variance were conducted with the variables of interest from the regression analyses to examine the nature of the factors that influence the levels of self-esteem in LGB individuals in the study's sample. Both the levels of self-esteem and the perceived social support were significantly correlated with whether the individual has attended conservative church at some point in their life ($F=4.944$, $\sigma = .034$; $F=4.699$, $\sigma = .038$). Whether the individuals attended a conservative church at some point in their life also strongly correlated with the levels of their stress over their sexual orientation ($F=3.506$, $\sigma = .071$). These results indicate that the likelihood of lower self-esteem, lower sense of perceived social support, and higher stress over one's sexual orientation was

stronger in those gay, lesbian, or bisexual persons whose background included religious influences that were perceived as conservative and not accepting of homosexuality as a natural and "divinely created" part of human life (Nugent & Gramick, 1989).

Whether the individual was a part of a "full-acceptance" church or not was associated with their total score on perceived social support scale as well as the social integration subscale of the SPS ($F=4.535$, $\sigma = .042$; $F=4.242$, $\sigma = .048$).

None of the religious and spirituality measures or their subscales were significantly related to participants' experiences within the church or their demographic characteristics. The exception was the significant relationship between extrinsic social religious orientation (ES) and a religious background that included a diverse church membership as well as gender-inclusive language in services. Extrinsic Social religious orientation subscale of the Intrinsic-Extrinsic Religious Orientation Scale – Revised (I/E-ROS) indicates that the persons who score higher on this subscale are more likely to subscribe to a faith orientation and attend a religious community in order to connect with other people (Gorsuch & McPherson, 1989). Thus, in this study's sample, participants held views that their religious commitment is an important part of their social life, especially in church communities with diverse membership ($p=.035$) as well as the practice of gender-inclusive language ($p=.004$).

Discussion

This study aimed to provide valuable information for researchers and practitioners about some aspects of emotional, social, and spiritual well-being of GLB individuals in religious work and provide some new insights into the impact of religious/spiritual experiences on their lives. In particular, the study has identified several significant factors that impact the levels of self-esteem of the GLB clergy. As other studies have indicated, self-esteem of a LGB individual is associated with the amount of distress the person experiences in acknowledging and embracing her or his sexual orientation (Vincke, deRycke, & Bolton, 1999). Greater perceived social support appears to be another booster for the person's self-esteem. These findings support the qualitative and theoretical studies that have suggested that association with gay-positive churches is related to greater self-esteem and greater social support (Fischer, 1989; Lukenbill, 1998; Rodriguez & Ouelette, 2000).

The factors identified in this study as significant influences on LGB individuals self esteem may be useful in working with this population. Both the protective and damaging influences in the lives of religiously committed LGB persons can be assessed for and worked with. The present study provides support for the previous assertions that not all religious influences have positive effects on the lives of LGB individuals (Hancock, 2000; Wagner, Serafini, Rabkin, Remien, & Willliams, 1994). Religious influences that are perceived as conservative have negative consequences for LGB persons who have been either brought up or have attended a conservative church. In particular, for this sample of Christian ministers having grown up in a conservative faith tradition does carry damaging effects on their psychological and social functioning.

Two possible explanations may be given to the fact that this study did not show any significant relationships between measures of religiosity and psychological well-being. First reason is the low number of individuals in the present sample. Because of this low number of participants, the study may not have fully tapped into influences of religion and spirituality in the lives of clergy.

The second reason may point to the fact that the two scales used in this study were instruments that cannot accurately access the type spirituality that many gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals ascribe to. For example, several studies have suggested that gay and lesbian spirituality, in contrast with traditional spiritual beliefs, emphasizes social justice, liberation theology, and valuing introspection and exploration (Lukenbill, 1998; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000; Shallenberger, 1994). The two scales, selected to measure religious orientation and spiritual well-being in this study, may reflect a more traditional approach to Christian religion and spirituality. Furthermore, measures of traditional intrinsic religious orientation has been associated with fundamentalism and prejudiced views toward homosexuality (Batson, Floyd, Meyer, & Winner, 1999; Fisher, Derison, Polley, & Cadaman, 1994; Hancock, 2000). The absence of significant results about the participants' intrinsic religious orientation and their religious well being may have to do with the way the scales have been written and with the type of religious individuals they have been normed with, rather than reflecting the true levels of intrinsic religious commitments and well-being in a group of less conservative Christian participants.

Along with answering questions about the impact of religion and spirituality in the lives of LGB Christian ministers, the study raises new ones. More studies must be done to explore further the unique aspects of psychological and social functioning of GLB clergy. An intentional inclusion of ethnic and racial minority LGB clergy would provide an invaluable information about the influence of intersection of identities and persons' religious/spiritual experiences (Greene, 1994). The current study also had a low representation of bisexual individuals and no transgendered persons. Whether the experience of bisexual and transgendered Christian ministers is similar to that of gay and lesbian or not is another question for scientific inquiry. Larger samples with religious leaders who come from various spiritual backgrounds (non-Christian) would add to our knowledge about the influence of diverse religious views on individuals' psychological and social well-being.

Among other suggestions for future research is to further explore the types of social support that have buffering effects for LGB religious leaders and in what circumstances. For example, the examination into the type of religious community a minister works with, the attitudes of the larger institutional structures within which that church operates, and the personal factors that influence ministers' levels of social support may provide useful in understanding the social well-being of GLB religious leaders.

The limitations of this study stem from the small sample size, selection bias, and the selection of the instruments. The author of this study obtained 32 surveys from the LGB religious leaders at a conference. As with all small research sample, results of such survey analysis must be viewed with caution. In addition, all of the surveys were collected at a conference that focused particularly on the "welcoming movement" within Christian churches. Thus, the responses of GLB ministers in this sample could have been skewed from what the a majority of clergy who are sexual minority experience day to day. The current sample of the study was drawn from a nonrandom, nonrepresentative sample of LGB persons and therefore, the generalizability of this study may be limited.

The difficulty of obtaining an accurate sample of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered clergy is great and this conference provided an adequate but limited opportunity to survey such a group of people. Sample bias is also seen in that how underrepresented are ethnic and racial minority LGB persons both in this study and in the conferences such as WOW 2000. Further efforts must be made to find access to those LGB religious leaders who also

are racial or ethnic minority and explore the dynamics of religion in their lives. The study was conducted using a self-report approach and therefore, is impacted by the limitations inherent with it. Lastly, the study was limited due to its selection of the instruments. As discussed earlier, the measurements of religious orientation and spiritual well being may not have accurately reflected the religious/spiritual attitudes of the study's sample.

The current study has attempted to provide information about the impact of emotional, social, and spiritual well-being in a sample of GLB clergy. An interviewee stated that she was "enthused" but felt that religious institutions still had "very far to go." I believe that the results indicate that there is a reason for much hope for both the religious and secular communities who can benefit from the gifts offered by numerous gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered clergy. At the same time learning more about the types of negative impact conservative religion has and continues to have on the lives of GLB clergy and GLB persons of faith may provide the scientific, religious, and secular communities with more grounds for changing attitudes and beliefs about homosexuality . In the words of de la Huerta in the Coming Out Spiritually: the Next Step, by re-claiming its spiritual traditions LGB community can discover the "pot of gold at the end of the rainbow" and "work together to heal ourselves and our community" (p.168).

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